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TAGS: [BG](#) [EAID](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [SENV](#)  
SUBJECT: THE AWAMI LEAGUE'S FIRST THIRTY DAYS: GREAT  
EXPECTATIONS STILL UNMET

REF: A. 08 DHAKA 1158  
[1](#)B. 08 DHAKA 1121  
[1](#)C. 08 DHAKA 1243  
[1](#)D. 08 DHAKA 1358

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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SUMMARY  
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[1](#)1. (C) The newly elected Awami League-dominated Parliament's initial sessions have been bogged down by petty issues rather than focused on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina,s campaign promises to create a more civil political climate and to ratify Caretaker Government ordinances to improve governance. Bangladesh is waiting to see whether Hasina's still-new government is willing and able to change the dynamics that led to the Caretaker Government's rule. The Embassy is meeting regularly with a range of political contacts to urge a clean break with the dysfunctional politics of the past and create a climate whereby all parties can work together for the greater good of Bangladesh.

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HIGH HOPES  
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[1](#)2. (C) During the two year rule of the Caretaker Government, a sweeping anti-corruption campaign and ambitious reform agenda led many to hope for a break with Bangladesh,s hyper-partisan past politics. During the negotiations leading up to the December 2008 elections, Sheikh Hasina,s Awami League signaled a willingness to adopt many of the Caretaker Government reforms and to create a more civil political environment. Moreover, the Awami League promised a meaningful role for the opposition should Sheikh Hasina lead the next government.

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DISAPPOINTING REALITY  
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[1](#)3. (C) Yet within two days of the opening of the new Parliament session a highly partisan row erupted over the Awami League,s decision to reduce the number of prime, front-row seats in Parliament allocated to the opposition. The new seating arrangement led to a BNP walkout and demands for three additional front-row seats before rejoining Parliament. In a meeting with Poloff, businessman and prominent Awami League member Salman Rahman described the seat controversy as "silly" and a waste of his party,s political capital.

[1](#)4. (C) Controversy also erupted over the Deputy Speaker

position. In the run up to the election, the Awami League and the BNP promised to appoint a Deputy Speaker from the losing party. However, the Awami League government instead appointed one of its own to the position and promised to amend the Constitution to create a second Deputy Speaker position for the opposition. The BNP rejected the offer. Senior BNP Parliamentarian Salauddin Qader Chowdhury described the second Deputy Speaker position as absurd. Awami League Organizing Secretary Sultan Mohammed Mansur Ahmed, who has fallen from favor with Sheikh Hasina, pointed out that other parliamentary systems such as those in India and the United Kingdom, had no such position.

15. (U) This early Awami League behavior caused one prominent journalist to wonder aloud just what the party hoped to accomplish. "The kerfuffle that has marred the first few days of Parliament is incomprehensible to me," wrote Zafar Sobhan, Assistant Editor of The Daily Star, in the respected newspaper,s January 30 edition. "The issue is what it would have cost the AL to concede these two minor arguments to the opposition in terms of what it would have gained in setting a positive tone, taking the moral high-ground, and winning the battle of public perception."

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REWARDING PARTY LOYALISTS  
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16. (C) Hasina's decisions thus far reflect her bias in favor of party members she views as most loyal to her. For example, Awami League leader Zillur Rahman is her choice as next President of Bangladesh, as a reward for his role in keeping

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the party together while Hasina was jailed on graft charges by the Caretaker Government. Abdul Hamid,s personal loyalty to Hasina earned him the prestigious post of Speaker of Parliament. In the first few days of her government, Sheikh Hasina surrounded herself with her most fiercely loyal party cohorts on the floor of Parliament and banished to backbenches party leaders whose loyalty she questions. Her former political secretary, Saber Hossain Chowdhury, and Awami League Publicity Secretary Asaduzzaman Noor, both senior leaders who advocated greater democracy within the party but consorted with DGFI during the state of emergency and are tainted, were relegated to seats on the opposition's side of Parliament. (NOTE: The over two-thirds majority the Awami League enjoys makes it impossible to seat all its members of Parliament on the Treasury bench.)

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MIXED SIGNALS ON THE ORDINANCES  
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17. (C) The Awami League has thus far not made bold moves to fulfill its pre-election promise to ratify ordinances passed by the Caretaker Government, many of which are designed to improve governance through measures such as bolstering local government. Its intentions regarding the ordinances remain unclear. In a conversation with Emboff in late January, the Prime Minister's son, Sajeeb "Joy" Wazed, described his "serious reservations about the illegal ordinances passed by an unelected government." He criticized several of ordinances as overly heavy-handed. A special parliamentary committee is reviewing the 122 ordinances approved by the Caretaker Government to recommend which should be permanently enacted by Parliament. The recent strong criticism of the Caretaker Government by some Awami League leaders (and opposition BNP members) could be laying the groundwork for Parliament to reject at least some of the ordinances. The US and the international community has pushed hard for the Parliament to ratify the ordinances, particularly in key areas, such as the Money Laundering and Anti-Terrorism ordinances. We have offered to assist the Parliament with an outside review of the ordinances.

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COMMENT: MISTAKES OR TRENDS?  
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18. (C) Hasina's refusal to fill the Deputy Speaker position with a member of the opposition and her party's reorganization of Parliament's seating chart to embarrass the opposition represent disappointing first steps by the Awami League. The coming days should shed further light on the prospects for a less partisan approach to politics. For example, local media reports the possibility of a compromise over Parliament's seating chart. The Awami League will soon apportion Parliamentary committee chairmanships, several of which it has promised to opposition lawmakers. Parliament will soon decide on which Caretaker Government ordinances to enact. We have been assured that the Parliament will pass a number of key ordinances, including those establishing a national Human Rights Commission and strengthening Bangladesh's counterterrorism legal regime. The Embassy will continue to press for a more conciliatory and inclusive approach to governance. It also will stress the importance of enacting ordinances to strengthen Bangladesh's democracy, development prospects, and ability to deny space to terrorists in this moderate, predominantly Muslim country of 150 million people.

MORIARTY